DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 959 CS 504 890

AUTHOR Austin, Bruce A.; Ventura, Paul G.
TITLE Crystal Balls and Mirrors: Reflections of Student Views on the Importance of Communication.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Education Work Relationship; Employer Attitudes; *Employment Potential; Job Performance; *Job Skills; Job Training; *Occupational Surveys; Perception; Speech Communication; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

To investigate several questions concerning the perceptions held by undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses, a 32-item questionnaire was first mailed to employers to determine their evaluation of various communication skills. They were instructed to suppose they were to hire a college graduate with special preparation in the following areas: oral and written communication, mass media production and analysis, and organizational dynamics. Next, a 58-item questionnaire was developed for students that paralleled the employers' questionnaire. Students were asked to indicate how important the performance index items were to their own career success. Then they were asked to give their opinion on how employers would feel about the skills listed. Among the findings are the following: (1) students reported that both the ability to perform selected communication skills and the ability to train others in these skills were important to their career success; (2) students did not perceive a difference between their own rating of importance for the communication performance and training functions and how they believed employers would rate the same item; and (3) students rated the importance of their own ability to perform the communication skills as more important than the employers' actual rating of the importance of these skills. (HOD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED255959

# CRYSTAL BALLS AND MIRRORS:

## REFLECTIONS OF STUDENT VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Bruce A. Austin

Paul G. Ventura

Rochester Institute of Technology

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Bruce A. Austin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 840

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last dozen or so years there has been a burgeoning interest in non-traditional career placement for the speech communication major. Several surveys of organizations and individuals, including speech communication alumni in public relations and organizational consulting, suggest that opportunities for degree-holders may lie in these fields, as well as in media production, technical writing, personnel, and staff training (Taylor and Buchanan, 1973; McBath and Burhans, 1975; Heath, 1981; Jamieson and Wolvin, 1976; Swenson, 1980; Blankenship, 1981; Kessler, 1981; and Fish, 1983).

These studies are typically concerned with two types of information: (1) business employers' views of communication skills appropriate to their organizations and (2) views held by employees who perform communication functions within these organizations. Little data, however, exist to indicate how undergraduates, prior to employment, regard the need for communication skills in the workplace. An otherwise thorough overview of communication career-related research by Weitzel and Gaske (1984), for instance, neglects any discussion of how students enrolled in communication programs see themselves or their careers. Yet the expectations of students can have a dramatic effect on their future job performance, not to mention the more immediate effects in curriculum structure.

The present study was designed to address several questions concerning the perceptions held by undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses. They were asked, in effect, to look into crystal balls and mirrors, in order to assess the importance of communication skills to their personal and professional development and to forecast the importance these same skills might have in the eyes of prospective employers.

The research reported here addresses three interrelated issues. Although set in the context of communication degree programs, these issues, of course, transcend disciplinary boundaries. The heuristic value of the present research can be argued for any discipline seriously examining the efficacy of its curriculum.

An ethical issue of importance concerns students' expectations for discipline-appropriate post-graduate employment and the value of various communication skills and knowledge students have acquired in the course of their educational program. Inadvertently or not, it is possible that communication instructors may under- or over-inflate the marketplace value of a communication degree and/or the importance of various components of their students' curriculum. In short, the concern here is that communication instructors may create and foster expectations among their students which may later prove to be false.[1]

A pedagogical issue of importance concerns the structure and composition of the communication curriculum. Here we seek to learn how well the curriculum prepares the student for "life after college." We hasten to underscore the notion that, undeniably, the goal of a college education is not simply to get the student a job; the realities of the marketplace, however, are equally undeniable.

A practical issue of importance concerns students' own evaluation of their ability to effectively perform various communication functions and what they feel will be expected of them by employers.

In brief, the present study asks about what we in communication teach, the emphases we place, and the expectations we help to create. Given these concerns, a set of research questions were developed. In the interest of space, and to eliminate redundancy, the research questions and our findings are presented in the Results section below.

## METHOD

### Sample

To determine employers' evaluation of various communication skills, a sample was drawn comprised of individuals listed in the 1983 Membership Directory of American Society for Personnel Administration. Individual names of personnel managers were selected on the basis of their company's location. The criterion used for inclusion was that the company's location was in the Buffalo, Rochester, or Syracuse, New York area. Using this criterion a total of 85 names resulted. In February, 1984 a questionnaire was mailed to the 85 individuals following procedures suggested by Dillman (1978). A total of 71 surveys was returned for a response rate of 83.5 percent. Demographic data on these individuals were not obtained.

To determine students' evaluation of various communication skills, individuals enrolled in four communication concentration classes at a northeastern college responded to a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed and completed in class by the students in May, 1984. A total of 76 students completed the questionnaire. The students ranged in age from 18 to 26 years ($\bar{X}$ = 21.4 years, SD = 1.5, Md = 21 years), 42.1 percent were women, 93.4 percent were Caucasian, and their class status was as follows: 2.7 percent freshmen, 8 percent sophomores, 41.3 percent juniors, and 48 percent seniors.

The students were not communication majors. Instead, as part of their academic degree program, students at this college are required to take three courses from a cluster -- or concentration - of discipline-related courses. The Language Concentration, as it is called, is comprised of Human Communication (an introductory, or overview, course), Small Group Communication, Persuasion, and Writing and Thinking. Thus, while students cannot be considered

analogous to students majoring in communication, our sample represents a self-selected group of individuals with, presumably, more interest in communication than others at the college.[2] If anything, then, we would expect that our sample's evaluations should be more conservative, or less enthusiastic, than among students majoring in communication.

Instrument and Procedures: Employers

A 32-item questionnaire was developed. First, the respondents were presented with a hypothetical situation. The employers were instructed to suppose they "were to hire a college graduate with a four-year college degree which has specifically prepared him/her in the following areas: oral and written communication, mass media production and analysis, and organizational dynamics." Given this context, respondents were then presented with two separate 13-item indices: a performance by the college graduate index and a training by the college graduate index. For the first index, respondents were requested to assess their perception of the importance of each item "for the college graduate to perform given your company's needs." The 13 items were prefaced with: "This employee is able..." For the second index, respondents were requested to assess their perception of the importance of each item concerning "potential training functions of the college graduate." The 13 items in this index were prefaced with: "Training other employees..." For both indices, individual item six-point response scales were provided, labeled at one end with "very unimportant" (coded as 1) and at the other end with "very important" (coded as 6). The six remaining questions are not relevant to the present study's purposes.

Instrument and Procedures: Students

A 58-item questionnaire was developed to parallel that of the employers' questionnaire. First, the student respondents were asked to indicate how important each of the 13 performance index items was to their "own, personal, career success." The index was prefaced with: "I should be able..." The second index presented the 13 training index items and, in addition to introductory notes, was prefaced with: "I should be able to train others..."

After completing these first two personal inventories of abilities the respondents were instructed to stop and wait for instructions. The class instructor then read the respondents a prepared set of instructions for completing the remainder of the questionnaire. This was important since the respondents were next requested to give their "best opinion on how important employers might feel about the skills listed." The instructions emphasized that there was no right or wrong answer and that the purpose of this portion of the questionnaire was "to discover what you think they (the employers) think." The next page of the questionnaire contained the performance index, prefaced with: "Employers feel employees should be able..." The following page presented the training index, prefaced with: "Employers feel employees should be able to train others (co-workers)..." For all four of these indices, identical (to the employer survey) six-point response scales were provided.

Four of the remaining six questions asked for demographic data. Two questions, using the same six-point response scale, asked "in general, how important are communication skills to your professional (career) development?" and "how important are communication skills to your personal development?"[3]

Data analysis was performed using SPSS$^{x}$ (1983). Listwise deletion of missing data was used for all statistical tests. Details on the statistical

routines performed on the data are integrated in the Results section. The justification for using inferential statistics with non-probability samples may be found in Winch and Campbell (1969).

## RESULTS

The first research question posed was: Is there a difference between the importance students assigned to communication skills for professional and for personal development? The mean response for each item on the questionnaire was very high (5.68 for professional and 5.62 for personal development) and the difference between means was not significant ($t = .69$, $df = 150$, $p > .20$, two-tailed). Thus, the students believed that communication skills were similarly important for both their personal and professional development.

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the students' and

---

Table 1 About Here

---

personnel managers' responses to the performance and training indices. Discussion of the personnel managers' responses has been reported elsewhere (see Austin and Ventura, 1985) and will not be repeated here. Instead, analysis of these data focuses on the students' responses and comparisons between students' and personnel managers' (hereinafter referred to as "employers") responses.

The second research question we posed concerned the students' perceptions of the importance to their own career success that they are able to perform and to train others in selected communication skills. As is indicated in Table 1, virtually all of the performance and training items were perceived by the students as important (mean response greater than 4.0). Only four performance and four training items had mean scores below 4.0. We also wondered if there was a difference between students' perception of the importance of their ability to perform and their ability to train others in communication skills. Results of a t-test comparing the summated scores on each index were nonsignificant ($t = .78$, $df = 150$, $p > .10$, two-tailed). Computation of a Pearson product-moment correlation between the two summated indices showed a significant positive relationship ($r = .57$, $p < .001$). Thus, in general, the students reported that the ability to perform selected communication skills and the ability to train others in selected communication skills were both important to their career success with no significant difference in rated importance between personal performance and training ability.

The third research question addressed a meta-issue: the students' perception of employers' evaluation of the items in the two indices. As is reported in Table 1, virtually without exception (cf. ability to produce audio-visual materials and preparing company image building programs), items the students rated as important for their own career success were also believed to be items that employers would find important. Using summated scores for all indices, Pearson correlations between students' ratings of the importance of their own performance skills and their perception of employers' ratings of these skills ($r = .35$, $p = .002$) and between students' rating of the importance of their own training skills and their perception of employers' ratings of these skills ($r = .45$, $p < .001$) indicate congruence of response.

Computation of t-tests also resulted in no significant difference between students' ratings on the personal performance and training dimensions ($t = .43$, $df = 150$, $p > .20$ and $t = 1.35$, $df = 150$, $p > .10$, respectively, both two-tailed). Thus, these findings suggest that the students' ratings of the importance of performance and training skills largely matched the students' perceptions of how employers would evaluate the same items. In short, students did not perceive a difference between their own rating of importance for the communication performance and training functions and how they believed employers would rate the same items.

The fourth and fifth research questions asked if there was a difference between the students' perception of how employers' would rate the communication performance/training functions and how the employers themselves actually rated these same items. In both instances, significant differences were found using summated performance and training index scores. Student perception of the importance assigned by employers on the performance index ($\bar{X} = 4.19$) was significantly higher than the importance actually assigned by the employers ($\bar{X} = 3.59$; $t = 5.05$, $df = 142$, $p < .001$, two-tailed). Results in the same direction were found when comparing student perception of the importance assigned by employers on the training index ($\bar{X} = 4.41$) to the importance actually assigned by the employers ($\bar{X} = 3.46$; $t = 7.79$, $df = 142$, $p < .001$, two-tailed).

The sixth and seventh research questions asked if there was a significant difference between the students' rating of importance for their own ability to perform/train other employees in communication skills and the importance employers actually assigned to these same employee performance and training skills. In both instances significant differences were found using summated performance and training index scores. Students rated the importance of their

own ability to perform the communication kills ($\bar{X}$ = 4.14) as significantly more important than the employers' actual rating of the importance of these skills ($\bar{X}$ = 3.59; t = 4.58, df = 142, p <.001). Results in the same direction were found when comparing the students' rating of the importance of their own ability to train others ($\bar{X}$ = 4.24) and employers' actual rating of the importance for these skills ($\bar{X}$ = 3.46; t = 6.00, df = 142, p < .001, two-tailed). Thus, students' evaluations of the importance of personal and training abilities were higher than the employers' actual ratings on these same issues.

## DISCUSSION

The students in the present sample reported that, in general, communication skills were very important for both their professional and personal development. Employers have also attributed very high importance of employees' communication skills to their company's operation (see Austin and Ventura, 1985). In both instances, while the response is certainly encouraging, the results may be a function of the questions posed; openly disavowing the value of communication may be akin to slandering motherhood or denying social truisms -- it simply is not done. Of greater interest, we believe, are the students' responses to the performance and training indices and the results of comparisons reported above.

Among the communication performance skills the students felt were most important to their career success were leading problem-solving and training groups and writing and delivering speeches (all had mean scores of 4.6 or greater). Among the training skills rated as most important were leading and participating in groups, listening skills, employing persuasive techniques,

and helping improve interoffice and interpersonal communication (all had mean scores of 4.6 or greater). By and large, the employers' actual responses to these two indices paralleled those of the students, although the students' responses tended to have higher mean scores. These results suggest a reasonably high level of congruence between the two groups and at least modest conformance with "reality" concerning the priority agenda of what we in communication teach, the emphases we place on what is taught, and the emphases placed on communication skills by business professionals. We use the adjective "modest" to describe the level of conformance given the differences reported between students' rating of the importance of the items in the two indices for their own career success and (1) employers' actual responses and (2) the students' perception of employers' emphases. As noted in the results section, students' perceptions of employers' expectations were significantly higher than the employers' actual ratings of importance. This finding might, perhaps, serve as a cautionary note to instructors to avoid hyperbole when stressing the importance of communication skills. Clearly, some skills are important -- as the employers reported -- and to diminish their importance would be in error. At the same time, over-emphasis may be just as misleading.

We can summarize the present findings by returning to the three interrelated issues raised earlier in this report. Our findings indicate that the students overestimated the importance that employers would attribute to the communication skills we examined. The second issue concerned how well a curriculum prepares students for their professional life. Our findings also suggest that although the students over-estimated the scale-value of importance for the skills measured (relative to the employer ratings), there was a good deal of agreement as to which skills were the most important for an individual to possess. These findings, then, indicate that what is being

taught will find practical application. Finally, and perhaps most encouraging, is our finding that students perceived communication skills as important to both their personal and professional success. A curriculum sensitive to student motivation and with a realistic view of career application will best reflect the vitality of the speech communication discipline.

## NOTES

[1]It is, of course, plausible to believe that students may selectively, and inaccurately, interpret faculty comments on these issues. Alternately, students may arrive at these assessments independent of faculty influence. A third possibility would suggest some combination of all three explanations. These issues are not addressed in the present paper. Still, the role of faculty, however minimal, in shaping or forming such judgments must be acknowledged as a distinct and plausible possibility.

[2]Indeed, if enrollment and desire to enroll can be viewed as indicators of interest and popularity, the Language Concentration is the second most popular (behind Psychology) in the College.

[3]Copies of the questionnaires are available from the authors.

REFERENCES

Austin, Bruce A. and Ventura, Paul G. (1985). Employer perceptions of needed communication functions in business organizations. Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association conference, Providence, RI, May.

Blankenship, Jane. (1981). Skills required by SCA members who hold jobs in business, industry, government, and social service settings. Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 35, 58-61.

Dillman, Don A. (1978). Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Fish, Sandra L. (1983). Necessary functions and competencies for organizational communication specialists. Paper presented at the Eastern Communiction conference, Ocean City, MD, April.

Heath, Robert L. (1976). Employer images of speech communication majors. Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 15, 14-17.

Jamieson, Kathleen and Wolvin, Andrew. (1976). Non-teaching careers in communication. Communication Education, 25, 284-291.

Kessler, Martha S. (1981). Communicating within and without: The work of communication specialists in American corporations. Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 35, 45-50.

McBath, James H. and Burhans, David T. Jr. (1975). Communication Education for Careers. Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association.

SPSS Inc. (1983). SPSS$^{X}$ User's Guide. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Swenson, D.H. (1980). Relative importance of business communication skills for the next ten years. The Journal of Business Communication, 17 (2), 41-49.

Taylor, K. Phillip and Buchanan, Raymond W. (1973). Vocational marketability of communication competencies. Southern Speech Communication Journal, 38, 285-291.

Weitzel, Al R. and Gaske, Paul C. (1984). An appraisal of communication career-related research. Communication Education, 33, 181-194.

Winch, Robert F. and Campbell, Donald T. (1969). Proof? No. Evidence? Yes. The significance of tests of significance. American Sociologist, 4, 140-143.

**TABLE 1**

Importance of College Graduates' Communication Skills
as Seen by Employers, Students, and Students'
Perception of Employers' Rating

| | Employers | | Students | | Students' Re Employers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $\bar{X}$ | SD | $\bar{X}$ | SD | $\bar{X}$ | SD |
| **Performance Skills** | | | | | | |
| Deliver oral reports | 4.57 | 1.26 | 5.37 | .84 | 5.43 | .85 |
| Lead training group meetings | 4.46 | 1.26 | 4.96 | 1.03 | 5.11 | 1.11 |
| Analyze communication breakdowns | 4.24 | 1.38 | 4.40 | 1.38 | 4.53 | 1.26 |
| Prepare in-house publications | 4.22 | 1.54 | 4.28 | 1.39 | 4.20 | 1.40 |
| Lead problem-solving groups | 4.12 | 1.24 | 5.39 | .87 | 5.36 | .86 |
| Prepare company image building programs | 3.93 | 1.65 | 4.03 | 1.55 | 4.72 | 1.36 |
| Produce audio-visual materials | 3.84 | 1.45 | 4.07 | 1.50 | 3.74 | 1.53 |
| Write speeches | 3.34 | 1.51 | 4.78 | 1.23 | 4.38 | 1.38 |
| Arbitrate employee grievances | 3.27 | 1.90 | 4.46 | 1.49 | 4.63 | 1.23 |
| Edit technical manuals | 3.24 | 1.62 | 3.57 | 1.78 | 3.71 | 1.58 |
| Write technical manuals | 3.06 | 1.60 | 3.61 | 1.71 | 3.82 | 1.52 |
| Write press releases | 2.99 | 1.65 | 2.83 | 1.31 | 2.74 | 1.26 |
| Produce radio programs | 1.50 | .94 | 2.29 | 1.08 | 2.15 | 1.06 |
| **Training Variables** | | | | | | |
| Improve listening skills | 4.77 | 1.24 | 4.67 | 1.33 | 4.77 | 1.11 |
| Methods for improved interpersonal communication | 4.65 | 1.23 | 4.76 | 1.11 | 4.95 | 1.03 |
| Utilize persuasive techniques | 4.60 | 1.24 | 4.82 | 1.10 | 4.66 | 1.16 |
| Lead group meetings | 4.49 | 1.29 | 4.67 | 1.16 | 5.05 | .89 |
| Participate in problem-solving groups | 4.38 | 1.19 | 5.11 | 1.03 | 5.20 | .91 |
| Deliver oral reports | 4.31 | 1.39 | 4.09 | 1.28 | 4.33 | 1.26 |
| Prepare oral reports | 4.18 | 1.36 | 3.99 | 1.28 | 4.11 | 1.31 |
| Participate in fact-finding conferences | 4.13 | 1.17 | 4.49 | 1.23 | 4.87 | 1.06 |
| Methods for efficient interoffice communication | 4.13 | 1.27 | 4.71 | 1.25 | 4.95 | 1.02 |
| Effective negotiation strategies | 3.52 | 1.64 | 4.51 | 1.27 | 4.74 | 1.04 |
| Impromptu mass media contacts | 2.43 | 1.44 | 3.55 | 1.41 | 3.70 | 1.38 |
| Public press conferences | 2.03 | 1.23 | 3.11 | 1.43 | 3.28 | 1.45 |
| Successful overseas placement | 1.62 | 1.15 | 2.71 | 1.43 | 2.85 | 1.49 |

1 = unimportant 6 = important

BEST COPY AVAILABLE